

# A visual feast: 5 favorite art books of 2021

[Heller McAlpin](#) December 9, 2021 5:00 AM ET



Meghan Collins Sullivan/NPR

Like most readers, I spend a lot of time happily immersed in words. But sometimes, even a dedicated logophile needs a break from nouns and narratives.

This year, constrained by the pandemic and a foot fracture, many of my favorite non-verbal activities — long walks, museums, concerts, travel, kayaking — were beyond me. Fortunately, there were plenty of gorgeous art books to provide hours of blissful visual diversion. Here I've rounded up a feast of favorites.

## ***Bird: Exploring the Winged World***

Soaring above this year's flock is *Bird: Exploring the Winged World*, by Phaidon editors, a fantastically well-curated collection of bird imagery in art and culture. Spanning millennia, from cave paintings to avant-

garde gallery walls, *Bird* is a celebration of the joy of juxtapositions and clever connections.

Yes, the trio of triple-named ornithological masters, John James Audubon, Roger Tory Peterson, and David Allen Sibley are all represented. But there's so much more: a Northern lapwing constructed of Lego bricks; Frida Kahlo's 1941 self-portrait, "Me and My Parrot," with a bird on each shoulder and two cradled in her folded arms; a still from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*; Surinamese banknotes featuring endemic birds; and Picasso's simple "Dove of Peace."

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Witty spreads like Doug Bowman's 2012 Twitter Bird logo facing Bob Clampett's 1950 Tweety for Warner Brothers, and Sesame Street's Big Bird paired with a giant inflatable Rubber Duck photographed in Hong Kong harbor add to the delight. It all made me wonder whether there are any artists who *haven't* depicted birds.

## ***William Morris***

Thames & Hudson's newly expanded *William Morris, edited by Anna Mason*, is filled with the gifted 19th century designer's sumptuous, stylized birds, flowers, and leafy prints — along with ornately furnished rooms, heavily inlaid dark wood furniture, and plush hand-knotted rugs.

"I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few," Morris wrote. How gratified he might have been by the abiding popularity of his green Willow Boughs wallpaper, first issued in 1887, and his Strawberry Thief cotton print fabric, from 1883, which turned up on face masks sold on Etsy this past year. Browsing its

plethora of illustrations — which encompass Morris's life (1834-1896) and work — is like visiting a really great exhibit at your own pace.

*The V&A Sourcebook of Pattern & Ornament* also features plenty of iconic Morris & Co. wallpapers and fabrics among its more than 1,000 diverse patterns from around the world. Helpfully organized by subject — specific flowers, trees, fruit, leaves, animals, stars, planets, weather and abstracts — this book can provide many happy hours of ogling for the design-inclined.

## ***Master of the Midcentury: The Architecture of William F. Cody***

Can't swing a trip to Palm Springs? *Master of the Midcentury: The Architecture of William F. Cody*, by Catherine Cody, Jo Lauria, and Don Choi, might not be quite as sunny, but it's sure to whet your appetite. Cody (1916-1978) dotted the local California landscape with private residences, cluster housing, churches, restaurants, country clubs, hotels, libraries and offices, many of which are still standing. These include Rancho Mirage, built in 1953 and long occupied by Frank Sinatra, and the Palm Springs' public library, built in 1975 and later enlarged. Cody's single story, open plan houses feature rough local stone walls, exposed wood or steel structures, and large windows that let in plenty of light and bleed the borders between nature and architecture.

## ***Woman Made: Great Women Designers***

*Woman Made: Great Women Designers* reflects what author Jane Hall characterizes as "women's experience of broader social and political emancipation." Many of the designers featured in this welcome

alphabetical compendium of noteworthies, from Aino Aalto and Rand Abdul Jabbar to Eva Zeisel and Sandrine Ébène de Zorzi, were among the first generation of women to study architecture and design

Each woman is awarded a full page, with a beautifully photographed example of one of her iconic creations, along with brief biographical notes. Chairs — at once functional, architectural, sculptural and technically innovative — are heavily represented here, even when they're not the first item that springs to mind in connection with its designer.

Particularly delightful surprises include 20th century Swiss textile designer Marianne Straub's geometric block print upholstery fabric woven in blues and greens for London Transport, California-based ceramicist Edith Heath's appealingly tactile clay tea pot, Andrée Putman's streamlined oak-framed Crescent Moon Sofa, and mid-century Danish designer Bodil Kjaer's elegant Office Desk, which was featured in three early James Bond movies. But each gander turns up another alluring treasure.

### ***The Unwinding and other dreamings***

I first encountered Jackie Morris' mesmerizing illustrations in what has become one of my favorite picture books of all time, *The Lost Words*. She co-authored it with Robert Macfarlane to celebrate words like fern and heron, which, shockingly, had been removed from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* to make room for technological terms like blog and broadband.

*The Unwinding and other dreamings*, Morris' new solo book (published by Unbound, a crowd-sourced press), similarly blurs the line between

children's and adult literature. Not meant to be read from cover to cover, its short vignettes are intended to help readers of all ages unwind. Morris' illustrations are more enchanting than the text — and even in this small format, her paintings invite you to lose yourself in them. Few artists create nightscapes as magical as these wintry scenes, filled with dark twisty branches, a white polar bear to cuddle against like a pillow, a fox slinking across moonlit snow, oversized fish swimming through the sky, and young heroines "curled in the curves of creatures." "Rest now, in the peace of the wild things," Morris urges in this calming bedtime elixir, perfect after a festive holiday celebration.